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CONTACT: Melissa Wagoner (Kennedy) June 7, 2007
(202) 224-2633
Margaret McPhillips (Cochran)
(202) 224-6414

Kennedy, Cochran Introduce Bill to Eliminate Health Disparities

Legislation will strengthen community efforts to address health disparities, health workforce diversity programs, and research on minority health

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Today, Senator Edward M. Kennedy and Senator Thad Cochran introduced legislation that would authorize roughly \$500 million to improve the health and health care of racial and ethnic minority and other health disparity populations. The bill is also co-sponsored by Senators Barack Obama, Jeff Bingaman, Hillary Clinton, Sherrod Brown, and Senate Assistant Majority Leader Dick Durbin.

Senator Kennedy said, "Your health should not depend on the color of your skin, the size of your bank account, or where you live. It is time to stop talking about health disparities and take action to eliminate them. All Americans, including people of color, deserve an opportunity for a healthy life."

Senator Cochran added, "Congress must work to ensure that all Americans have the opportunity to receive quality healthcare. I am pleased to join in introducing this legislation, which would provide the education, training, research opportunities, and collaborative tools necessary to provide optimal care for all of our citizens."

Racial and ethnic minorities make up approximately one third of the US population but disproportionately comprise 52 percent of the uninsured and suffer a greater burden of illness and death than the white population. The Minority Health Improvement and Health Disparity Elimination Act proposes a comprehensive approach to address health disparities. It provides grants to communities to increase public awareness about access to health care and disease prevention. The bill also reauthorizes the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities at the National Institutes of Health and strengthens its role in coordinating and planning minority health and health disparity research. Senator Kennedy was the lead sponsor on Minority Health and Health Disparities Research and Education Act of 2000, which was enacted into law and created the National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities at NIH.

Studies have shown that minority health professionals are more likely to care for patients from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds and to provide culturally sensitive care, so creating a diverse healthcare workforce is essential for a health America. The bill would help achieve that goal by reauthorizing the programs that help schools recruit and retain minority students and students from disadvantaged backgrounds like the Title VII health workforce diversity, Centers of Excellence and Health Careers Opportunity programs.

The bill also reauthorizes and strengthens the Office of Minority Health, mandates uniform data collection standards for federal health programs and creates an advisory committee at the FDA to address issues related to racial and ethnic minorities.

Despite the great advancements in health and healthcare, racial and ethnic minority populations continue to experience poorer health resulting in higher levels of illness and death.

The Minority Health Improvement and Health Disparity Elimination Act addresses health disparities through education and training, healthcare quality and access, research, data collection, and leadership and collaboration.

Improving Cultural Competency among Healthcare Providers

- Establishes an Internet Clearinghouse at the Office of Minority Health to include culturally appropriate templates for visual aids and standard documents to improve provider-patient communication
- Requires the Secretary of HHS to support the development, evaluation, and dissemination of cultural competence curricula for use in health professions schools and continuing education programs

Increasing Diversity in the Healthcare Workforce

- Reauthorizes HRSA diversity in the health professions programs including the Centers of Excellence, the Health Careers Opportunity Program, the Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students, and the Loan Repayments and Fellowships program
- Establishes grants for scholarships to minorities who make a mid-career change to a health profession
- Requires health professional schools that receive federal funding to annually collect and report demographic data on applicants, matriculates and graduates, as well as graduates' intended practice location and discipline
- Requires the Secretary to establish a database with aggregated and disaggregated statistics collected from health professional schools to track and monitor racial and ethnic diversity of health professionals

Enhancing Healthcare Quality and Access

- Establishes grants to communities for projects to promote positive health behaviors, and to improve outreach, participation, and enrollment in available healthcare programs
- Codifies the CDC Racial and Ethnic Approaches to Community Health (REACH) to assist communities in mobilizing and organizing resources to support effective and sustainable programs to reduce disparities in health and healthcare
- Establishes demonstration grants to improve access to healthcare, patient navigators, and health literacy education services; to create collaborative partnerships led by federally qualified health centers to implement systems of primary care modeled after a program at the Bureau of Primary Health Care at HRSA; and to address longstanding, unmet health and healthcare needs in the Mississippi Delta
- Establishes Health Action Zones to support State, tribal or local initiatives to improve minority health

Research on Health Disparities and Addressing Genetic Variations and Health

- Reauthorizes and strengthens the National Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities at the NIH
- Requires AHRQ to create a strategic plan regarding health disparities, award grants or contracts for health disparities research, and establish public-private partnership to determine the best practices in disease management strategies and interventions
- Requires the Secretary to increase and apply knowledge about genetic variation with a focus on minority populations and examine the benefits and availability of genetic screening, diagnostics, and treatment
- Creates an FDA advisory committee on pharmacogenomics and emerging issues, which shall make policy and guidance recommendations on issues related to racial and ethnic minorities

Data Collection, Analysis, and Quality

- Ensures the collection and reporting of data on race and ethnicity, primary language, and other health disparity indicators within federal health programs

Leadership, Collaboration and National Action Plan

- Strengthens, clarifies and adds to the duties of the Office and requires the Office to collaborate and cooperate with other Federal agencies
- Requires the Office to develop and implement a Department-wide plan to improve minority health and eliminate health disparities

